

Yosemite National Park

General Management Plan & Flood Recovery Update

Number 8, Summer 1997

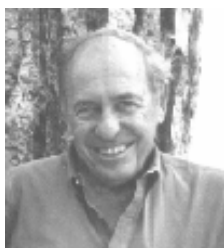
"The purpose of park roads remains in sharp contrast to that of the federal and state highway systems. Park roads are not intended to provide fast and convenient transportation. They are intended to enhance visitor experience while providing safe and efficient accommodation of park visitors and to serve essential management access needs."

National Park Service Park Road Standards, 1984

From the Superintendent...

Dear Friends of Yosemite:

As the summer comes to an end and we begin to feel the change of seasons in Yosemite, I want you to know that other changes are taking place here in the park as well. But before we discuss these projects I would like to express my appreciation to all Park employees for their hard work this season, to park visitors for their patience while we complete flood repairs, and to park partners for their support as we enter this time of tremendous change.



The El Portal Road project is ready to move forward. The 1997 flood compelled the Park to accelerate the redesign and reconstruction of this road, making it safer for travel while maintaining its historic "park-like" feel and protecting the Wild and Scenic Merced River corridor. The environmental assessment has been completed and the final plan approved by the Regional Director. Great care has been taken to address environmental, scenic, cultural and recreational concerns. Although wider, it is very important to us that the overall character of the road be maintained. It will still be a winding, narrow mountain road.

There has been great concern from many individuals about the restrictions brought about by the upcoming construction schedule. The construction is scheduled to take three years. It will take this much time because of the work stoppages scheduled for summers, daily access "windows," and Christmas and holiday periods. We have attempted to address the needs of employees, visitors, surrounding communities, and others, and the proposed schedule is included in this issue. Any changes in the proposed schedule will mean greater access rather than more restrictive time frames. Financial incentives have been provided in the contract for early completion of the project.

We want to thank everyone for their comments—your input was very important and we have made every effort to take them into consideration. We look forward to the improvements this project will bring to the visitor experience.

Sincerely,

Stanley T. Albright
Acting Superintendent

The El Portal Road Improvement Project—- *Why?*

One of the major recovery projects that the National Park Service must address is the El Portal Road (Highway 140) improvement project. The January flood damaged the road in 29 locations and weakened it in at least 30 others.

The roadway from Pohono Bridge to Parkline in El Portal is essentially the same as it was in the late 1920's—a two lane roadway with nine foot lanes and a one foot shoulder. Over the last 70 years, the road has suffered the effects of flooding eight times, mud slides and rock fall numerous times, and has been repaired in many places as a result. The road has been closed innumerable times as a result of these events.

The January flood caused damage that could not simply be repaired—reconstruction was required. In addition to the natural events that damage the deteriorating road, the pavement needs replacing, drainage structures are inadequate for runoff from rain and snow, the guardwall does not meet crash safety standards, and the current lane width is so narrow, vehicles including RVs, buses, and delivery trucks, are unable to stay within their lanes in some areas. This section of road experiences double the number of motor vehicle accidents as other roads in the park. We have an obligation to our visitors and our employees to make the road as safe as possible. A reconstructed El Portal Road will be safer and better able to withstand future forces of nature, resulting in fewer and shorter closures.

Originally designed for horses and later developed as an automobile route into Yosemite Valley, the road now handles one quarter of all vehicles entering Yosemite Valley. Vehicle size, weight, and capacity have evolved over the years, and use of the road has increased dramatically as the park's visitation grew beyond four million visitors. The El Portal Road is an important link from Yosemite Valley to the National Park Service's maintenance and office complex as well as employee housing in El Portal and Mariposa. After the 1997 flood, the road's inadequacies were heightened by the five month closure of the road, the resulting economic impact to communities dependent on the road, and the partial severance of park operations in El Portal from Yosemite Valley. The El Portal Road continues to be the "All-Year Highway" for visitors and is sometimes the only access to Yosemite Valley during the winter months when snow and ice are prevalent on the Big Oak Flat Road (Hwy 120) and the Wawona Road (Hwy 41).

Starting this winter, reconstruction of the El Portal Road will begin. The improvements include: widen-

ing travel lanes to 11 feet (currently they are 9 ½ feet); repaving the road; rebuilding the guardwall with simulated rock; increasing lateral clearance by removing rock from the cut slope; decreasing curve sharpness by slightly realigning the roadway; improving road drainage by constructing a drainage ditch and increasing the size and number of culverts. These changes will improve roadway safety by enhancing the ability of all drivers, especially of buses, RVs, and trucks, to keep their vehicles to the right of the centerline. This will also improve structural integrity and strengthen the road sufficiently to withstand future flooding.

The El Portal Road construction reflects the current needs of Yosemite visitors, and will accommodate foreseeable changes in visitor facilities, services, and needs. The decisions that we make now to reconstruct the road must be sufficient to support the future of visitor transportation.

The El Portal Road Construction/Access Schedule ***TYPES OF ACCESS***

UNRESTRICTED ACCESS: All construction activity will cease, equipment will be removed, and the road will be available for full, 2-lane public access from Parkline to Pohono Bridge.

SCHEDULED ACCESS: Access for all vehicles from Parkline (El Portal) to Pohono Bridge (Yosemite Valley) from 6:00 a.m. to 8:30 a.m., 4:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m., and 10:30 p.m. to 12:30 a.m.

GUARANTEED ACCESS: 24-hour access for all vehicles, with no more than a 1-hour delay, from Parkline to Pohono Bridge. Possible Saturday and/or Sunday construction break.

THE SCHEDULE

Construction is projected to begin on December 1, 1997, and access during subsequent months is as follows:

December 1-19, 1997:	scheduled access
December 20-January 4, 1998:	unrestricted access
January 5-April 15, 1998:	scheduled access
April 16- May 21, 1998:	guaranteed access
May 22-August 2, 1998:	unrestricted access
August 3-September 4, 1998:	guaranteed access
September 5-September 7, 1998:	unrestricted access

The construction schedule for the remainder of 1998 and 1999 is similar to what is outlined above, and we will include the specific time frames in later issues.

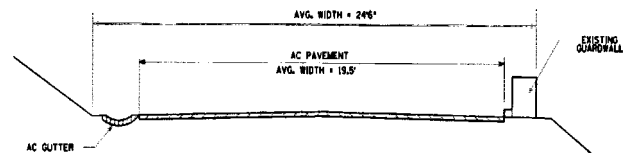
The El Portal Road Environmental Assessment

A critical part of Yosemite's planning process is public involvement. The general public, federal, state, and local agencies and organizations must always be provided the opportunity to raise their concerns regarding the effects of any proposed action by the National Park Service. As part of the process of improving the El Portal Road, Yosemite distributed over 600 copies of the draft Environmental Assessment (EA). The EA was also made available on the internet at <http://www.nps.gov/yose>. Interested individuals, agencies, and organizations were invited to submit comments from May 7 to June 16, 1997.

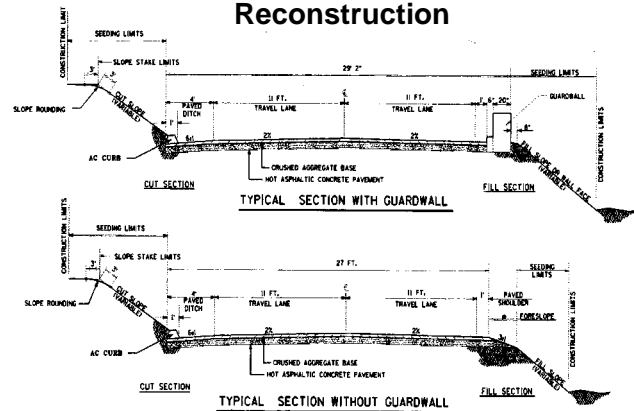
During the comment period, Yosemite hosted three open houses in May—in San Francisco, Mariposa, and Yosemite—and one in El Portal in June. Advertised in flyers, news releases, the internet, and in the EA itself, these events featured exhibits about the proposed action and the alternatives, and information on environmental considerations, transportation issues, and construction and design. Professional staff was on hand to answer questions and accept comments. Comments covered concerns such as to the effects on scenic beauty and the visitor experience, transportation and safety, wildlife and sensitive species, cultural and historic resources, and socioeconomic impacts.

Great care was taken to analyze the potential impacts of this project. Mitigation measures were developed that minimize impacts identified in the draft EA. Several additional studies were completed. As an example, a biological assessment of sensitive wildlife species potentially found along the highway corridor was conducted. The results of the biological assessment said that there would not be an adverse effect on any federally listed species or their critical habitat. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service concurred with the "No Adverse Effect" determination of the biological assessment. A Determination of Eligibility (DOE) was prepared to further understand the cultural resources within the project area. The DOE recommended that the entire corridor was eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as the "Merced River Travel Corridor." The corridor contains numerous cultural resources exemplifying several thousand years of utilization of the area by prehistoric and historic peoples. The State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation agree that the project will not have an adverse effect on this eligible property.

Existing Conditions



Reconstruction



Some facts about the road project:

- *Mitigation measures have been developed to minimize impacts of the project; measures were added or increased in response to public comment.*
- *The access schedule was developed with extensive and diverse public input.*
- *The El Portal Road will not turn into a high-speed roadway because of wider lanes. The posted speed for cars will continue to be 35 mph.*
- *Reconstruction of the roadway will stabilize the road, making it better able to handle storm conditions and other natural events. This will reduce the number and length of closures.*
- *The historic Park-like character of the road will be maintained. It will still be a narrow, winding, mountain road.*
- *Public safety will be greatly enhanced. Buses and large vehicles will be able to stay within their lanes.*
- *The road will be built on a "design/build" contract basis, allowing the contractor to work more efficiently and quickly. This is the first construction contract of this type in the Park Service and should result in an accelerated construction schedule to reduce impacts to the public and park operations.*

Yosemite Lodge Update

The first phase of work at the flood-damaged Yosemite Lodge is scheduled to begin in November this year with the removal of flood damaged structures. This should be completed by March, 1998. Work on new roads, including the new routing for Northside Drive, and utilities will begin in March, 1998, and continue to completion by the end of October, 1998. Construction of new structures—guest lodging and employee housing—should begin in October, 1998. Some new Lodge rooms and employee housing will begin to be available by summer, 1999. Although construction schedules can be greatly affected by weather and length of the construction “season,” the lodge should be in full operation by the fall of 2001.

The Yosemite Lodge EA and the comprehensive design reflect the vision outlined in the 1980 General Management Plan and the 1992 Concession Services Plan. However, flood recovery funding was requested for replacement and relocation of flood-damaged structures and functions. As a result, the changes in circulation/parking, buildings such as the new registration building, and new pedestrian ways, although planned, are not included in this phase of construction. Flood recovery funds will accomplish approximately 65% of the Lodge project. As a result, the Yosemite Lodge area will receive major changes, but will continue to be a mix of existing units and new construction until funding is available to complete the entire complex.



Superintendent
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The “New” Glacier Point

The dedication of the Glacier Point Project was on Wednesday, September 10, 1997, in the new Glacier Point Amphitheater.

This event culminates several years of planning and two years of construction. The buildings are a very attractive replacement for the “temporary” structures (which have been demolished) that had become familiar to all Glacier Point visitors. The new granite amphitheater is a wonderful addition. It will be a magnificent site for interpretive events or to just enjoy the incomparable view.

The Glacier Point Project was co-sponsored by The Yosemite Fund, Yosemite Concession Services, and the National Park Service. The project was funded through \$2.7 million from the capital improvement program in the Yosemite Concession Services (YCS) contract and a \$500,000 contribution from The Yosemite Fund, a nonprofit organization that raises money for park restoration and preservation projects. The National Park Service oversaw this historic project, yet no federal funding was used. This project represents the first time that money generated from a National Park Service concessions contract has been used for major capital improvement which directly benefit all visitors.

On your next trip to Yosemite, we hope you will be able to join us for a ranger-led program conducted in these wonderful improvements!

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